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SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL UPDATE -- MARCH 30, 2005

REF: BANGKOK 2017

1. (U) HOUSE SPEAKER'S PARLIAMENTARY PERFORMANCE HARSHLY CRITICIZED

The opposition Democrat Party (DP) again walked out in protest of actions by House Speaker Bhokin Bhalakula. The latest protest occurred on March 25 when Bhokin rejected a request by Democrat Party Chief Advisor (and former prime minister) Chuan Leekpai to clarify references made to him by Deputy Interior Minister Sermsak Pongpanich. This is the second walkout in less than two weeks (reftel). Bhokin, who was strongly backed Prime Minister Thaksin and his wife for the House Speaker's position has been subject to ridicule even by some Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party colleagues, especially the Mod Dum (Black Ant) faction led by First Deputy House Speaker Suchart Tanchareon, for his clumsy performance as Speaker. DP MPs, of course, are scathing in their accusations that Bhokin is biased and prejudiced in a position that should be at the least nominally neutral. Critics of a Thai-language daily even dubbed him "dictatorial Bho-Shin," sarcastically rhyming his name with that of the PM Thaksin's Shin Corporation. More serious commentators have criticized Bhokin but also chastised the DP for being so quick to walk and trivializing its role as the lead opposition party.

2. (U) BUT THAKSIN DENIES BHOKIN ABOUT TO BE REPLACED

Prime Minister Thaksin subsequently defended Bhokin's performance as House Speaker, saying that he was "straightforward" in his approach to the job but also suggesting that Bhokin could be "more compromising" in conducting House sessions and seek more cooperation from both Government and Opposition whips in settling any conflict. Thaksin denied any truth to widespread rumors that House Speaker Bhokin was about to be replaced, claiming that any new speaker would face the same challenges from Opposition members.

3. (U) TRT FACTION LEADER SANOH REPORTEDLY SNUBS THAKSIN'S GOLF INVITATION

Meanwhile, Sanoh Thienthong, leader of the TRT Wang Nam Yen faction, is apparently still smarting over Prime Minister Thaksin's "insulting" offer to appoint him as honorary chief advisor to the government whip. He has spurned the Prime Minister's offer to join in a conciliatory round of golf. The invitation from Thaksin came after last week's strong public grumbling by Sanoh and his faction supporters over what they considered a paucity of positions allocated to their faction - the last straw being the offer to Sanoh of the honorary whip advisor's post -- a position that Sanoh described as "a joke." Thaksin shrugged off the snub, telling reporters that he had not invited only Sanoh to play and besides that, The Prime Minister added, the only purpose of his game was "to have fun and relax."

4. (U) CABINET MAKES NEW APPOINTMENTS

On March 22, the Cabinet announced the appointment of a number of MPs and others to political posts. Some of these include:

(1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Dr. Pracha Kunakasem (Party List 2) - appointed as the Foreign Minister's Advisor
Mr. Pitiphong Temcharoen (Bangkok MP) - appointed as the Foreign Minister's Secretary
Mr. Phairot Tanbanchong (Phayao MP) - appointed as the Deputy Foreign Minister's Secretary
(2) Dr. Phansak Winyarat - appointed as Chairman of the PM's Policy Advisory Board.

(3) Mr. Jakrapop Phenkhao (the ex-Government Spokesman) appointed as Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Surakiat Sathienthai's Secretary.

(4) Former Justice Minister Phongthep Thepkanchana appointed as Head Government Whip.

BOYCE